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EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE OF THE PROGRAMME OF THE UNITED NATIONS HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES

Forty-seventh session

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 511th MEETING

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva,
on Wednesday, 9 October 1996, at 10 a.m.

Chairman: Mr. MCHUMO (United Republic of Tanzania)

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The meeting was called to order at 10.25 a.m.

ANNUAL THEME: THE PURSUIT AND IMPLEMENTATION OF SOLUTIONS (agenda item 4) (continued) (A/AC.96/863, A/AC.96/867 and A/AC.96/872)

1. Mr. ZAHRAN (Observer for Egypt) said that, as the Office of the High Commissioner was under growing pressure because of the current international situation, international efforts should be mobilized and combined and coordination improved between the activities of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), other United Nations bodies and international institutions working in the humanitarian sector and the field of human rights. Cooperation between regional and international organizations should also be ensured.

2. Stressing the importance of voluntary repatriation, he said that the countries of origin should facilitate the return of refugees by restoring confidence and improving the conditions of reception. In view of the growing complexity of the refugee problem worldwide, its root causes should be addressed through the peaceful settlement of disputes, in conformity with Chapter VIII of the Charter of the United Nations.

3. Some 6 million of the world's 13.2 million refugees were to be found in Africa. Although positive results had been achieved in some countries, such as Angola, Liberia, Mozambique and parts of the Horn of Africa, the Great Lakes region continued to be torn apart, and international and regional efforts to calm the crisis and alleviate the suffering of the local population must be stepped up. The international community had responded well to the appeals of the High Commissioner and the Department of Humanitarian Affairs (DHA) in that respect.

4. Human rights observers had an important role to play in the monitoring of respect for human rights, the investigation of crimes against humanity and the prompt prosecution of persons accused of such crimes. Their activities enabled refugees and displaced persons to be repatriated as quickly as possible, and under conditions of security. In so far as its resources permitted, Egypt had taken part in those efforts by sending such items as medicine, medical equipment and vaccines.

5. In the former Yugoslavia, UNHCR had to help more than 4 million refugees and displaced or beleaguered persons. On behalf of the Egyptian Government, he praised the Office for its work, as lead agency, in coordinating the activities of the humanitarian institutions and organizations involved. The situation of Bosnian civilians and refugees had improved remarkably thanks to political initiatives at the international level, particularly the conclusion of the Dayton peace accords and the recent elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina. All the parties concerned would be sure to respect those accords and the election results, thereby facilitating the peaceful return, and compensation, of the refugees and displaced persons. UNHCR's role during and after the implementation of the peace accords was certainly no less important than the humanitarian activities it had carried out during the period of armed conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In that connection, the persons accused of crimes against humanity should be brought to trial as soon as possible so

as to encourage peaceful coexistence and reconciliation and reconstruction. The Egyptian people had demonstrated their solidarity with the victims of the war in Bosnia by contributing to the collection organized by the Egyptian Red Crescent Society in cooperation with the Egyptian authorities.

6. Flexibility should be shown in dealing with groups which did not come under the definition of refugees contained in the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol. The Convention of the Organization of African States (OAU) governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa, which took regional realities and imperatives into account, had proven effective vis-à-vis the particular problems of Africa in the field. Another relevant instrument was the Cairo Declaration on the protection of refugees and displaced persons in the Arab world, which had been drawn up in November 1992 by a group of Arab experts in cooperation with the International Institute of Humanitarian Law. More recently, following its September 1995 conference, the Institute had published the San Remo Declaration, entitled "United for the Respect of Humanitarian Law", which contained important recommendations dealing in particular with issues under UNHCR's mandate. The Institute's twenty-first Round Table, held in September 1996, had focused on the consequences of armed conflicts as a humanitarian challenge, taking into consideration the distress of the refugees and the role played by UNHCR. That was an example of effective cooperation between UNHCR and a non-governmental organization (NGO), and he hoped it would not be the only one.

7. Mr. MOMANYI (Observer for Kenya) said that the theme of the pursuit and implementation of solutions was a timely one, for the global refugee crisis had assumed alarming proportions.

8. With nearly 8 million refugees and several million returnees and displaced persons, Africa accounted for more than half the world's total flows of such persons. The root causes of the phenomenon should be examined critically. Experience had shown that population displacements and refugee flows were essentially caused by man, through political, religious, ethnic or economic conflicts, to which should be added famine, insecurity, human rights violations, violence and environmental degradation. In East Africa, including Kenya, refugee problems were dealt with from a regional perspective, but conflict prevention was essential to durable solutions.

9. Refugees were all the more likely to choose voluntary repatriation if they were assured of help in restoring their country's war-torn economy. The earmarking of economic resources to, and the development of marginal zones were also essential ingredients for prevention, but such measures required that States demonstrate political will and respect for fundamental human rights.

10. Local integration was another solution to the refugee problem, and Kenya would continue to fulfil its international obligations in that regard; however, it did not have the capacity to absorb all those claiming refugee status. As to resettlement, his country welcomed the steps taken by the Australian, Canadian, United States, Italian and other Governments to admit refugees from Kenya. The United States Government had recently provided two

of the most vulnerable Somali refugee groups with opportunities for resettlement; he appealed for the resettlement of two other groups, which were equally vulnerable.

11. The host countries' socio-economic infrastructure and environment were suffering from the population displacements. Kenya, two thirds of whose territory had been classified as unproductive land, had had its environment destroyed in the refugee hosting areas. Thanks to the German Government, particularly the German Agency for Technical Cooperation (GTZ), trees had been planted in and around the refugee camps and the refugees had been encouraged to use low-energy means of cooking and to look after the plants and trees. GTZ had also endeavoured to establish close cooperation with local NGOs, regional authorities and the inhabitants of the zones concerned.

12. Kenya was sparing no effort to find lasting solutions to the refugee problem, encourage dialogue and facilitate the channelling of humanitarian aid to those most in need of it. Unfortunately, its infrastructure had been heavily loaded and the country's principal trunk road had been badly damaged by heavy lorry traffic. Kenya was also an advance post for humanitarian relief and aid operations in Rwanda, the Sudan and Somalia, and served as the place of refuge for humanitarian aid staff evacuated for security reasons.

13. Referring to the fact that UNHCR was taking care of a small number of refugees of Kenyan origin in Ethiopia, he pointed out that that was a cross-border issue and that members of the refugees' communities of origin were constantly crossing the Kenyan-Ethiopian border in both directions.

14. He expressed his gratitude to UNHCR, the World Food Programme (WFP), the Windle Charitable Trust, the Hugh Pilkington Charitable Trust of the United Kingdom, Care Kenya, the World Lutheran Federation, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), Doctors without Borders Belgium, and all the main actors for their continuing support to the 250,000 refugees his country had taken in.

15. Mr. OUEDRAOGO (Observer for Burkina Faso) said that the Executive Committee had before it a draft restructuring plan which would mark the work of its forty-seventh session. He was concerned at the division of the Regional Bureau for Africa into three different operating units; it risked affecting the circulation of information not only among those units but especially between them and the UNHCR programme recipient countries.

16. The political situation in Africa, a continent wracked by open or latent conflicts and by political, social and ethnic troubles, remained a matter of great concern. It inevitably led to a problem of ever-increasing numbers of refugees - a problem that continued to intensify and expand.

17. The UNHCR Executive Committee had chosen the pursuit and implementation of solutions as the working theme for its forty-seventh session. It was in that spirit that the Government of Burkina Faso was working within the framework of regional structures such as the Organization of African Unity and subregional structures such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) or the Council of the Entente and at the bilateral level to put a stop to the refugee problem. It was in that same spirit that the Heads

of State of the ECOWAS Committee of Nine on Liberia, of which Burkina Faso was a member, had met in August 1996 to attempt to resolve the Liberian crisis. To that end the Community would need assistance from the international community, as the size of its Cease-fire Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) would have to increase from 8,000 to 18,000 men. Sufficient material and financial resources were also needed to ensure disarmament, demilitarization and the quartering of troops, all of which were prerequisites to the democratic peace process in Liberia.

18. Furthermore, Burkina Faso, under the aegis of its President, continued to take initiatives and to offer contributions, advice and mediation to countries where conflicts were in progress, such as Sierra Leone, Liberia and the countries of the Great Lakes region, or that had undergone periods of difficulty, such as Mali and Niger. With regard to the Malian and Nigerian refugees in Burkina Faso, his Government had signed two tripartite repatriation agreements in the hope that the voluntary repatriation of the tens of thousands of refugees it was harbouring would entail no major problems. He thanked the international community for its assistance to those refugees.

19. The refugee problem was fundamentally a question to be dealt with at the political, economic and social levels. UNHCR might wish to study it in all those aspects, with the participation of competent experts, including representatives of refugees. In the final analysis, there could be no durable solution to the refugee problem without stronger economic structures and improved living conditions in the countries and regions of origin. For the time being, Burkina Faso reaffirmed its willingness to remain a host country and to cooperate with the High Commissioner in the pursuit of durable solutions to the problems of refugees and displaced persons. He thanked the High Commissioner for having appointed and installed a representative in Burkina Faso.

20. Mr. ALIC (Observer for Bosnia and Herzegovina) said that his country, which did not wish to be a burden on the international community, appreciated the humanitarian aid so generously provided under extremely difficult circumstances. His country's objective was, and must be, to achieve autonomy, but the fact remained that the current situation made humanitarian aid indispensable. Industry was functioning at only 8 per cent of its pre-war capacity; there were 900,000 unemployed and more than 11,000 invalids in the civilian population alone, not to mention the families of soldiers who had been killed in combat, children who had lost their parents, elderly persons and other vulnerable persons for whom there were no suitable social programmes. Many of the women who had become their families' sole support during the war still fulfilled that role; they, along with the many demobilized soldiers throughout the country, constituted special social categories requiring the establishment of programmes for their specific needs. The extent of those problems called for a comprehensive approach and the rapid implementation of wide-ranging programmes.

21. It would be wrong to think, as some people did, that peace and democracy were enough in themselves to resolve the social, economic and political problems faced by a society as complex as Bosnia and Herzegovina. The intrinsic link between reconstruction and repatriation must be recognized.

It was essential to create the conditions that would enable the refugees and displaced persons to return to their homes. With the end of the war, the structure of assistance must be modified. Emergency aid must give way to the reconstruction of infrastructure and the implementation of social programmes that would facilitate the return of the refugees and displaced persons. As reconstruction and repatriation were not taking place at the expected pace, current humanitarian aid programmes must be pursued, not to say strengthened, especially as winter was approaching.

22. To recommend a reduction in aid on the grounds that peace had been restored was not consonant with the realities in the field. International aid met only a fraction of the total population's real needs. In 1996, for example, foreign aid had actually covered less than one fifth of the food and nutritional needs. The growing gap between expected and actual results could not fail to have social and psychological repercussions. The war was over, but the situation remained fragile and unstable and demanded concerted action, as well as the support of the United Nations system, the Multinational Implementation Force (IFOR) and NGOs.

23. There were currently more than a million refugees from Bosnia and Herzegovina scattered throughout the world, and more than 60 per cent of the total population of Bosnia and Herzegovina had left its original place of residence. What Bosnia and Herzegovina demanded and desired was the voluntary return of all those people. Repatriation was necessary not only to ensure respect for one of the fundamental human rights, or as a pre-condition for reconstruction and the return to normalcy, but also because, without it, the ethnic cleansing that had given rise to the exodus would somehow be legitimized. His Government was grateful to all those countries that had taken in its nationals, and to UNHCR for the aid it had continued to provide to displaced persons. Bosnia and Herzegovina now called on the international community to help it create the conditions conducive to those persons returning home.

24. The people of Bosnia and Herzegovina, who were skilled and well-educated, had the capacity and the will to reconstruct their country and create a democratic civil society that recognized human rights and fundamental freedoms. The country did not need pilot projects, but rather an ambitious programme conducive to repatriation and reconstruction and a smooth transition from emergency aid to development. That meant that certain steps would have to be taken. The first would be to encourage a climate of reconciliation; the second, to strengthen current UNHCR efforts to promote freedom of movement; the third, to expedite implementation of land-mine-awareness and demining campaigns in order to facilitate the process of return and prevent further loss of life; and the fourth, to set up compensation and reconstruction programmes that would enable the displaced persons to return to their homes and to restore property to its original owners.

25. He regretted that, during the crisis which had beset his country, the United Nations system and international NGOs had not done their utmost to help the population help itself. In that connection, he called on UNHCR, other institutions and donor countries to expand the ongoing programmes aimed at setting up local NGOs and strengthening those already in existence, at

ensuring the on-the-job training of local leaders and field workers, and at disseminating information in the Bosnian language that could help the people of Bosnia and Herzegovina in their effort to reconstruct and make a better future for their children.

26. Mr. ABALO (Observer for Benin) commended the High Commissioner for the smooth implementation of her programme, thanks to which the problems caused by the influx of refugees into Benin had been resolved. When, in 1993, Togolese refugees had arrived en masse, first at the border villages and then in Benin's major cities, his country's authorities had unstintingly given them shelter and new hope. Observant of the international conventions to which it was a party, Benin had refrained from refouling or expelling people who feared for their safety. Benin wished to thank the many organizations, including UNHCR, that had helped it to provide those refugees with emergency aid in the form of food and medicine.

27. In addition to the Togolese, 14,000 of whom were still in camps and host families, Benin was host to many other refugees, including Nigerians from the Ogoni ethnic group, Zairians, Cameroonians, Burundians, Rwandans, Chadians, Sri Lankans, Algerians and Sudanese. New strategies were therefore needed, as well as courageous and concrete action, to enable Benin to cope with the situation. Despite the cooperation of the international community, problems remained in two areas: the voluntary repatriation of refugees wishing to return to their homeland and the resettlement of those who remained in Benin, on the one hand, and the resources needed and the strategic management of those resources, on the other.

28. With regard to voluntary repatriation, the joint programme being implemented by UNHCR, Benin and Togo was bearing fruit: more than 105,000 Togolese refugees had returned home. To encourage the return of those refugees who were still undecided, that programme should be strengthened particularly by financing income- and savings-generating community-level micro-projects. Regarding the strategic resources needed to attain the objectives, the large number of refugees - almost 20,000 people - posed a problem. The resources made available to the National Coordinating Body for Assistance to Refugees should be reviewed so that that body could meet its obligations under the voluntary repatriation programme.

29. Among his Government's priority actions were seminars and training for staff assigned to the refugee programme, promotion of public awareness of Benin's humanitarian activities and establishment of a system for rapid communication between the persons responsible for the refugees' security. He hoped that the related activities of the international community would soon bear fruit.

30. Mr. MOHAMEDOU (Observer for Mauritania) paid tribute to the High Commissioner and her colleagues for their sometimes dangerous missions on behalf of refugees, whose numbers continued to grow. It was true that the international situation remained explosive and that armed conflicts in certain countries were still forcing people to flee so that by early 1996 the refugee total had reached 26.1 million. The refugee problem, which was acquiring disastrous proportions, left no continent unscathed.

31. The theme of the current session - the pursuit and implementation of solutions - was of great importance for all populations. The Executive Committee should study durable solutions with a view to discouraging exodus, establishing efficient warning systems, preventing fresh population placements, organizing and supervising refugees in host countries so as to prevent environmental damage, setting up parallel food-distribution programmes of micro-projects for host-country populations, and ensuring prompt initiation of special programmes for the reintegration of refugees who returned to their country of origin.

32. As at 7 October 1996, contributions to the UNHCR budget represented only 59.6 per cent of the expected total. The attention of the international community should be drawn to the gravity of that situation. He called on the principal donors to make additional contributions in order to stem and lastingly to resolve the refugee problem.

33. Mr. ALEEM (Sudan) said that his country, which had been an active member of the Committee for more than a quarter of a century, wished to open a new page in the history of its cooperation with UNHCR. The refugee situation placed a very heavy burden on the Sudanese Government and people: destruction of the environment, constant pressure on the infrastructure, political and social consequences and conflict with local populations. According to a 1988 United Nations report, international aid to the Sudan covered only 30 per cent of the country's actual refugee-related expenses. His Government had asked UNHCR to carry out an in-depth survey of all the refugees in the Sudan in order to assess their real impact on national resources.

34. Once the Government had perceived the international community's lack of interest in the fate of the refugees in the Sudan, it had invited UNHCR senior management to visit the country and see the real conditions in the camps. During his visit in March 1996, the Deputy High Commissioner had become acquainted with the refugee assistance programmes; that visit should pave the way to better relations with UNHCR. In Sudan's opinion, voluntary repatriation under conditions of dignity and security was the best solution. Within the framework of the tripartite agreements between the Sudan, UNHCR and the countries concerned, 12,996 Chadian refugees and more than 300,000 Ethiopians had been repatriated. Arrangements had also been made for the repatriation of 409 Syrians.

35. As it had proved impossible to reach a similar agreement with Eritrea, Sudan had attempted to conclude a bilateral agreement with UNHCR for the repatriation of 500,000 Eritrean refugees. Experience had shown, however, that success in voluntary repatriation did not come easily, as the situation had first to change in the country of origin: Sudan had experienced a reflux of Eritrean returnees. Refugee protection must be assured, even if issues of sovereignty in the countries of origin made that difficult.

36. His delegation was astonished at the accusations contained in the statement of the Observer for Eritrea. Sudan, having adopted an open-doors policy, had admitted more than a million refugees over a 30-year period. UNHCR was well aware that Sudan had placed many facilities (education, health,

social services and even land) at the refugee's disposal and had allowed them to move freely within its territory. Despite all that, the Eritreans were accusing Sudan of pillage and rape, acts which were forbidden by the religion of the Sudanese. His delegation rejected those accusations and the associated defamatory and irresponsible statements.

37. Sudan was not opposed to the voluntary repatriation of refugees. On the contrary, it was ready to sign immediately a tripartite agreement with Eritrea and UNHCR, especially as the Eritrean refugees were refusing to repatriate without security guarantees. Furthermore, UNHCR had commended Sudan for its unhesitating cooperation with the Ethiopian refugees. Eritrea, by contrast, had not been in the least cooperative, resorting to dilatory tactics so as to hinder the refugees' return. Eritrea in fact wished to exploit the international community, undoubtedly in order to finance its military adventures.

38. His delegation wished to stress that there had been positive developments in his country, creating a climate conducive to the refugees' return. Elections to the National Council had been held and steps had been taken to guarantee peace. The peace agreement signed with the rebel groups, in particular from southern Sudan, had permitted some refugees to return. UNHCR and the host countries were welcome to send representatives to Sudan to see the situation for themselves. Sudan, in turn, would like to send representatives to those countries to convince the Sudanese refugees to return home.

39. Sudan had repeatedly brought up the fate of Sudanese children kidnapped by the rebels. UNHCR, however, seemed to be losing interest, basing its position on reports from its staff that denied the reality of the situation. UNHCR should re-examine the matter objectively and neutrally. As to the displaced persons, his delegation had studied the proposal on international protection, as well as Economic and Social Council resolution 1995/56, which called on UNHCR to protect refugees. In Sudan's view, that solution, besides possibly complicating relations between UNHCR and the Governments of the countries of origin, would have a major financial impact on UNHCR, whose resources were already limited.

40. His country undertook to respect the regional and international agreements and to find durable solutions to the problem, particularly through the voluntary repatriation of refugees. He called on UNHCR and the international community to support projects on behalf of the refugees and displaced persons.

41. Mr. BENJELLOUN-TOUIMI (Morocco) said that his delegation shared the concern for efficiency, transparency and responsibility evinced by UNHCR during its efforts to restructure and adopt new working methods. The decision to delegate greater authority to the field must not, however, harm the essential central functions. Adapting programmes to the needs of each situation was a practical and rational approach likely to improve results, notwithstanding the scanty resources available to UNHCR. Morocco welcomed the completion of Project Delphi and the progress made in following it up.

42. UNHCR should pursue its activities in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Rwanda. The conclusion of the Comprehensive Plan of Action for Indochinese refugees, and the reconciliation achieved in Mozambique were as encouraging for the international community as for UNHCR.

43. Since Morocco's 1995 appeal for UNHCR to re-examine the case of the Sahraouis in the Tindouf camps, close consultations had been held with senior UNHCR management to consider how the Office could fully implement its mandate. His delegation was encouraged by the sincere willingness and open-mindedness shown by UNHCR in that connection. The exchange of views was continuing, and Morocco welcomed UNHCR's commitment to establish a comprehensive programme adapted to the region, one which would take full account of the reality in the field and of the need to promote solutions.

44. The choice of "the pursuit and implementation of solutions" as the annual theme for 1996 echoed Morocco's concerns. The international community and UNHCR believed that voluntary repatriation was far and away the most desirable solution. For Morocco, it was not incompatible with the plan to resolve the situation of the Sahraouis in the Tindouf camps to give them the option of returning to their homes, providing their choice was voluntary. Most of the population of the Sahara which was to take part in the referendum was located in the territory of the Sahara. Consequently, all those who would henceforth be returning to their homes with the help of UNHCR could, when the time came, exercise that right freely, on the same footing as those who had never left. The international community and UNHCR were rightly insisting on the conditions of return, which must be decent and dignified. Morocco had consistently called for return. It had also taken care to explain all the constitutional guarantees - which had recently been strengthened - and the legal and international guarantees offered to the Sahraouis in the Tindouf camps. They for their part, had always welcomed the call, despite their dramatic situation. Some of the Sahraouis who had returned to Morocco had borne arms against the country but were now a part of national life. Morocco had given its agreement in principle to the establishment of a UNHCR office in Laayoune in order to stress that fact and to facilitate the repatriation of other Sahraouis in the Tindouf camps who might wish to return home. Conscious of the close link between repatriation and reintegration on the one hand and development on the other, Morocco had been endeavouring for more than 20 years to raise the socio-economic and cultural level of the Sahara. It considered the population of the Tindouf camps to be Moroccan and would therefore not wish their situation to be even more difficult than it already was. Nevertheless, it was duty-bound to ensure that humanitarian aid reached its intended beneficiaries and was not diverted. That was why it had welcomed the creation of a UNHCR branch office in Tindouf and hoped that an international official would soon be designated to head it. The choice of the annual theme for the forty-seventh session could only be interpreted as a refusal by the international community to accept the status quo. Morocco encouraged UNHCR to show even greater resolve in seeking appropriate long-term solutions, the most desirable of which was none other than voluntary repatriation.

45. Mrs. MAIWAND OLUMI (Observer for Afghanistan) said that, while the Afghan people had always fought on behalf of civilization, liberty, justice, peace and human rights, the militia installed in Kabul were attempting to

impose their own ideas and new principles in order to break up Afghanistan and not merely to deter Afghan refugees from returning home, but also to encourage further internal population displacements.

46. The High Commissioner had expressed the hope that the repatriation of Afghan refugees would begin with the coming-to-power of the would-be new authorities in Kabul. The world seemed to have forgotten the methods those militia had used to seize power illegally in so short a time, after procuring the latest weapons and establishing themselves by force in various parts of the country. The High Commissioner's hope would surely remain vain. Those militia, who were supported from abroad, had promulgated barbaric laws totally contrary to all human rights. Indiscriminately massacring anyone found guilty under their "Islamic laws", persecuting and torturing women, they demonstrated total disregard for the Charter of the United Nations, fundamental freedoms and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. God only knew what they would be capable of once they had succeeded in sowing anarchy everywhere. The High Council of the Islamic State of Afghanistan had strongly condemned their tyranny and reactionary attitudes, and the international community should do likewise. According to the UNHCR Chargé de Mission in Kabul, shops were closed, the streets were deserted and the residents were fleeing the capital en masse. Considering the treatment awaiting them there, what Afghan refugees dare so much as contemplate returning to, or residing in the region? To encourage them to do so would be contrary to the very mandate of UNHCR, under whose Statute the provision of international protection was indissolubly linked to the pursuit of durable solutions.

47. Mr. N'GORAN (Observer for Côte d'Ivoire) said that, while voluntary repatriation remained the best solution, its realization, like that of resettlement in third countries, depended on often uncontrollable factors. The only possibility for the refugee was then to live in the country of asylum, whether he was assimilated there or not. That was what was happening in Côte d'Ivoire, which hoped to enact legislation that would enable some refugees to be integrated. In that regard, his country, having obtained the consent of UNHCR, planned to register the refugees in order to issue them identity cards. Côte d'Ivoire was officially host to some 400,000 Liberian refugees, 305,000 of whom lived in an area comprising the entire western part of the country - not in camps, but mixed in with the population. For a long time, Côte d'Ivoire had officially rejected the notion of refugee and spoken only of "brothers in distress", which was why 40 per cent of the population was composed of immigrants. It was especially to protect the refugees, who lived on close terms with the population, from the movements of Liberian rebels that the Government had instituted a military operations zone in the west of the country which included the refugees' hosting area. Unfortunately, the Ivorian authorities did not have the resources to manage that zone, which was why they were asking UNHCR to share the costs of maintaining security there. The establishment of that zone should in no case be considered as a sign of a new policy towards the refugees. Continuation of the current policy - which it had to be admitted, was no longer universally accepted within the country - would depend on the success of the mission assigned to the zone. It was therefore incumbent on the international community to help Côte d'Ivoire take up the challenge.

48. Preventive measures were certainly needed to ensure refugee protection. The prime requirement, however, was for strategies that would offer them a minimum of well-being so as to keep them from committing criminal acts. Côte d'Ivoire having undertaken to refine its food-aid coverage, about 124,000 refugees would be excluded from it. Persons who, according to surveys, could become self-sufficient would not actually do so unless they were helped and supported. Unfortunately, the promised assistance had not been forthcoming, and reserves were inadequate. To date, the only income-generating projects had been micro-projects and agricultural projects. The success of commercial micro-enterprises depended on the purchasing power of the target groups: the people in the hosting area were for the most part refugees, and therefore indigent. Even if the projects did get under way, when supply exceeded demand the traders would be forced to sell at a loss and would end up bankrupt. Micro-projects did not, therefore, necessarily lead to self-sufficiency. For their part, agricultural projects required that new land be cleared and endangered the environment. The sudden massive arrival of refugees, who in some localities outnumbered Ivorians, had caused a profound imbalance in available natural resources. In addition, the hosting area contained industrial plantations, so that the availability of arable land was already limited.

49. The Liberian refugees could therefore not be confined to agricultural activities and small businesses. His Government was proposing to create jobs in the hosting area by undertaking major public works with the help of the international community. The projects would be a part of regional and local development programmes. They would facilitate movement and communication within the zone, contributing to the inhabitants' security and well-being.

50. The innovative solution adopted by Côte d'Ivoire - integration of the refugees into the Ivorian population - entailed constraints which should not be lost sight of. It was difficult for his country to ensure refugee protection at a time when food aid was suffering drastic reductions and income-generating projects were not producing the desired results. Côte d'Ivoire therefore appealed to the international community as a whole to help it pursue its novel policy with regard to the Liberian refugees.

51. Mr. MIGUIL (Observer for Djibouti) said that, despite certain repatriation operations that had led to durable solutions, the refugee problem had never been as serious as in recent years, especially as concerned the granting of asylum and the physical protection of refugees. The international community must give its full support to the host countries that, regardless of their own political, economic and social difficulties, were taking in hundreds of thousands or even millions of refugees.

52. Djibouti had been admitting successive waves of refugees for about 20 years. A large-scale operation for the repatriation of Ethiopian refugees had been undertaken with the assistance of UNHCR. Camps in Djibouti still contained about 20,000 Somalian and several hundred Ethiopian refugees. Those people were being looked after by UNHCR, but tens of thousands of others had settled in the city of Djibouti, causing serious environmental degradation. Refugees accounted for some 23 per cent of his country's population. The weak social infrastructure was being subjected to unbearable

pressure and could no longer meet the needs of the Djiboutians. He sincerely believed that, in tandem with repatriation, the solution lay in instituting development programmes in the region of origin.

53. The problem of the Ethiopian refugees had perhaps been solved, but, in view of the deteriorating situation in their region of origin, north-western Somalia, that was not the case of the problem of the Somalian refugees. For the majority of those refugees who lived in the city of Djibouti, and for the Djiboutian families affected by the economic crisis, the situation was increasingly difficult to bear. Accordingly, Djibouti formally requested UNHCR to do as it had done for the Ethiopian refugees living in the city of Djibouti and to plan to transfer 15,000 to 20,000 Somalian refugees to camps in 1997 in order to alleviate their suffering.

54. The civil war having been over for almost two years, more than 15,000 displaced persons had spontaneously returned to their regions of origin. As to the approximately 2,000 Djiboutian refugees still in Ethiopia, a Djiboutian delegation, accompanied by a representative of the UNHCR Djibouti office, was in Ethiopia in order to proceed with their identification and to plan a repatriation project. The Government formally requested UNHCR to prepare a multisectoral assistance and resettlement programme for the more than 15,000 Djiboutian spontaneous returnees and the 50,000 persons displaced within the country in the wake of the devastating fratricidal conflict. In addition, note should be taken of the precariousness of the recent Djibouti-to-Ethiopia repatriation operations.

55. Population displacements had basically economic causes. UNHCR and the international community should henceforth give priority to development programmes in the countries of origin. In the pursuit and implementation of lasting solutions, regional institutions such as the Intergovernmental Authority on Drought and Development (IGADD) could, with the support of international organizations, plan for, manage and solve refugee-generating conflicts.

56. Mr. WILLYBIRO SAKO (Observer for the Central African Republic) said that, since the early days of independence, his country had hosted refugees, most of them from central Africa, but others from West Africa, East Africa or southern Africa. Despite the diversity of their cultural and linguistic origins, they had been able to integrate rapidly into the country's socio-economic structures thanks to the capacity for assimilation of the Central Africans.

57. The Central African Republic, which had ratified the international conventions on refugees, had set up its own management structure, the National Commission for Refugees, which had long been cooperating with UNHCR. A sub-commission was in charge of considering requests for asylum.

58. His country accorded the same treatment to refugees as to its own citizens. The refugees could use social infrastructures and arable land free of charge and also had ready access to commercial activities. It had none the less been necessary to create reception sites, because of the large number of refugees from neighbouring countries.

59. Thanks to the help of the international community, coordinated by UNHCR, the Central African Republic had admitted and continued to admit asylum-seekers. Despite the economic, social and humanitarian problems engendered by the presence of displaced persons, the Government would not change its policy towards refugees.

60. Places in educational institutions were needed for more than half the refugee population. Because of the conditions set by UNHCR for the granting of scholarships not all the demand for such assistance could be met, and some refugees had therefore submitted applications to the Central African authorities, which had been unable to respond favourably due to the difficult economic situation. That situation had occasioned serious unrest and so led to the deployment of security forces in the cities. Secondary and primary schools, on the other hand, remained open to the refugee population. The continuing movement of refugees to the cities in search of work was aggravating the employment problem.

61. In view of those difficulties, his country believed it preferable to practise prevention and had therefore invested in preventive diplomacy at the subregional level, as testified by the recent conclusion of a non-aggression pact among the countries of central Africa. However, because that commitment did not shield the Central African Republic from further influxes of refugees, his Government appealed to the United Nations for greater mobilization for global peace and for the opening of sufficient credits not only to prevent internal conflicts and population displacements, but also to combat worldwide poverty, which was the principal source of discontent and power struggles. He paid tribute to the High Commissioner for her past and continuing role as mediator in Chad and other countries.

62. The Central African Republic, believing that its efforts to solve the refugee problems in the subregion deserved to be encouraged and supported, called for a special programme of international assistance to that end.

The meeting rose at 1 p.m.